



## A comment on the voice and status of Vermiculated Fishing-Owl *Scotopelia bouvieri* and a correction to Dowsett-Lemaire (1992) on the Maned Owl *Jubula lettii*

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In 1992 I published a paper on the voice of an owl which I had identified as the Maned Owl *Jubula lettii* for reasons explained below.<sup>4</sup> It appears (thanks to D. Sargeant *in litt* to C. Chappuis, November 1993) that it was misidentified and the species concerned was, in fact, the Vermiculated Fishing-Owl *Scotopelia bouvieri*. A paper recently published by Atkinson et al<sup>1</sup>, reviewing knowledge on the voice of all three African fishing-owls including *S. bouvieri*, confirms this and prompts me to write a correction to my earlier paper.

The owls, of which I heard several dozen in 1990-91 in the Kouilou Region of southern Congo, were never adequately seen when calling, and playback of the tape failed to attract one to close range. Maned Owl was certainly in the area. One was seen at dusk in a patch of dryland forest, where the unknown song was heard several times on that night and another. Feathers were also identified from one which escaped from a mist net in flooded forest (exactly where a pair of owls produced the unknown songs all night), and an experienced hunter shot a calling *J. lettii* near Bena in the Mayombe. The identification of my calling birds was based on circumstantial evidence, but this hunter certified that his bird called like the tape of the owl I had recorded in the same area in September 1990, and I believed him as his identification of various tapes of owls played to him could not be faulted. Incidentally, some of the owls called for lengthy periods, even for months, in dryland forest where one would not have expected to find fishing owls.

In 1991, copies of my tape were sent to C. Chappuis, C. Erard and R. Ranft. The first two replied that they did not know the authors of these calls. The song of a captive female *S. bouvieri* recorded at Chester Zoo (published in Figure 11 in Atkinson et al<sup>1</sup>) is similar to song-type one illustrated in Figure 1 of my 1992 paper, except that it appears lower-pitched. The middle section of 6-8 hoots falls in the range of variation of 4-7, occasionally more, notes heard in the forests of

Congo. The existence of this tape was previously unknown to me. Their Figure 12 illustrates a call with an irregular rhythm, which sounds (in Chappuis<sup>3</sup>) like a rather raucous, low-pitched attempt at a double-note song (produced by a bird held in captivity, probably an immature on account of the timbre and lack of rhythm).

If both of these song-types (often given in duet) and the low, raucous wail (published by Chappuis<sup>3</sup>) are uttered by *S. bouvieri* as all present evidence shows, then its currently presumed status as a scarce bird must change into that of an abundant species in certain habitats. They reached densities of 16 duetting pairs/km<sup>2</sup> in the seasonally flooded forests of the Kouilou, in addition to the wailing birds — of which there was one for every two pairs of duetting birds. I watched and recorded the author of the wailing call at close range over a large pool in the Mayombe (a tape of which was spectrographed by Atkinson et al<sup>1</sup> and was unable to age the bird, who was solitary. The captive author of the same call published by Chappuis<sup>3</sup> could not be aged (C. Chappuis *in litt*). By analogy with Pel's Fishing-Owl *Scotopelia peli* (Liversedge<sup>5</sup>), it is possible that the wail is only given by immatures. In Zambia, recently independent immatures (easily recognised by their plumage, which is paler than the adults', and with a yellowish, not rufous forehead) occupy territories separate from the adults and which they advertise with their loud wailing calls — pers obs, and confirmed by many other observers including R.J. Dowsett and R. Stjernstedt. A tame *S. bouvieri* brought up as a chick at Bomassa in northern Cameroon is still only producing the wailing call at age one and a half (pers obs April 1996).

In the Kouilou, the authors of these lower-pitched wails were often intermixed with the pairs producing the hooting duets, in the same area of flooded forest. If highest densities are achieved in flooded habitats, *S. bouvieri* is nevertheless also encountered in dryland forest, where its food cannot be fish. The first bird I

tape-recorded in the Mayombe (and whose song is illustrated in Figure 1 of my paper) was calling on a hillside, and the stream at the bottom was very small, only a few centimetres deep in places, and unlikely to have contained much in the way of fish. Two months later the owl was still in the same area, calling with its mate. With the recent rains the valley bottom had become rather marshy and was inhabited by large numbers of frogs. A patch of dryland forest in Bas-Kouilou where it was heard on two nights had good populations of birds and bats but, of course, no fish, and very few frogs.

Further investigations in Odzala National Park in northern Congo in 1994–95 confirm that *S. bowieri* prefers shallow, still water in pools in swamp forest. Once again, the highest number of owls heard was in the one extensive area of seasonally flooded forest in the park. Where located near big rivers, the owls were always in an area of brackish water and small swamps on old arms of the river. R.J. Dowsett (pers comm) saw the species once in the headlights of his vehicle on the edge of a pool on the road, in an area of several square kilometres of dryland forest. The nearest small stream was 1 km away. It seemed likely that the owl was hunting for frogs, the only vertebrate food in that and other pools on the road. Brosset and Erard<sup>2</sup> mention that a captive *S. bowieri* fed happily on chicken heads, so both birds and frogs might be alternative food to fish. The tame bird from Bomassa, mentioned above, has been hunting for itself for several months and has been seen eating mice, frogs and large insects (R. G. Ruggiero pers comm)

For the moment, the conclusion is that the song of *J. lettii* remains unknown. For an experienced hunter to have confused it with that of *S. bowieri* may suggest that it is of a similar pattern. An old wildlife scout I worked with recently in Odzala National Park knew eight different owl species including *J. lettii* and *S. bowieri*. He described the former as singing also in duet, the song consisting of one hoot followed by a series.

### Acknowledgements

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Maned Owl *Jubula lettii*  
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### References

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